

THE EVILS OF GOSSIP

A Sermon to Those Who Are Disposed to Talk Too Much.

Discourse of Dr. Talmage on the Text "Discover Not a Secret to Another"—Good and Bad Secret Societies.

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A practical question which is asked in most houses, and for many years, is here asked by Dr. Talmage and answered; text, Proverbs 25:9, "Discover not a secret to another."

It appears that in Solomon's time, as in all subsequent periods of the world, there were people too much disposed to tell all they knew. It was blab, blab, blab; physicians revealing the case of their patients, lawyers exposing the private affairs of their clients; neighbors advertising the faults of the next-door resident; pretended friends betraying confidences.

One-half of the trouble of every community comes from the fact that so many people have not capacity to keep their mouths shut. When I hear something disparaging of you, my first duty is not to tell you, but if I tell you what somebody has said against you and then go out and tell others what I told them that I told you, and we all go out, some to hunt up the originator of the story and others to hunt it down, we shall get the whole community talking about what you did do and what you did not do, and there will be as many scalps taken as though a band of Modocs had swept upon a helpless village. We have two ears, but only one tongue, a physiological suggestion, that we ought to hear a good deal more than we tell. Let us join a conspiracy that we will tell each other all the good and nothing of the ill, and then there will not be such awful need of sermons on Solomon's words: "Discover not a secret to another."

Solomon had a very large domestic circle. In his earlier days he had very confused notions about monogamy and polygamy, and his multitudinous associates in the matrimonial state kept him too well informed as to what was going on in Jerusalem. They gathered up all the privacies and poured them into his ear, and his family became a sorosis or female debating society of 700, discussing day after day all the difficulties between husbands and wives, between employers and employees, between ruler and subjects, until Solomon, in my text, deprecates volubility about affairs that do not belong to us and extols the virtue of secretiveness.

By the power of a secret divulged families, churches, neighborhoods, nations, fly apart. By the power of a secret kept great charities, socialities, reformatory movements and Christian enterprises may be advanced. Men are gregarious—cattle in herds, fish in schools, birds in flocks, men in social circles. You may by the discharge of a gun scatter a flock of quails or by the plunge of the anchor send apart the denizens of the sea, but they will gather themselves together again. If you by some new power could break the associations in which men now stand, they would again adhere. God meant it so. He has gathered all the flowers and shrubs into associations. You may plant one forgetmenot or heartsease alone, away off upon the hillside, but it will soon hunt up some other forgetmenot or heartsease. Plants love company. You will find them talking to each other in the dew.

You sometimes see a man with no outbranchings of sympathy. His nature is cold and hard, like a ship's mast ice glazed, which the most agile sailor could never climb. Others have a thousand roots and a thousand branches. Innumerable tendrils climb their hearts and blossom all the way up, and the fowls of heaven sing in the branches. In consequence of this tendency we find men coming together in tribes, in communities, in churches, in societies. Some gather together to cultivate the arts, some to plan for the welfare of the state, some to discuss religious themes, some to kindle their mirth, some to advance their craft. So every active community is divided into associations of artists, of merchants, of bookbinders, of carpenters, of masons, of plasterers, of shipwrights, of plumbers. Do you cry out against it? Then you cry out against a tendency divinely implanted. Your tirades would accomplish no more than if you should preach to a busy ant hill a long sermon against secret societies.

Here we find the oft discussed question whether associations that do their work with closed doors and admit their members by passwords and greet each other with a secret grip are right or wrong. I answer that it depends entirely on the nature of the object for which they meet. Is it to pass the hours in revelry, wassail, blasphemy and obscene talk or to plot trouble to the

state or to despoil the innocent, then I say, with an emphasis that no man can mistake, No! But is the object the defense of the rights of any class against oppression, the improvement of the mind, the enlargement of the heart, the advancement of art, the defense of the government, the extirpation of crime or the kindling of a pure hearted sociality, then I say, with just as much emphasis, Yes.

There is no need that we who plan for the conquest of right over wrong should publish to all the world our intentions. The general of any army never sends to the opposing troops information of the coming attack. Shall we who have enlisted in the cause of God and humanity expose our plans to the enemy? No; we will in secret plot the ruin of all the enterprises of Satan and his cohorts. When they expect us by day, we will fall upon them by night. While they are strengthening their left wing we will fall on their right. By a plan of battle formed in secret conclave we will come suddenly upon them crying: "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon." Secrecy of plot and execution is wrong only when the object and ends are nefarious. Every family is a secret society, every business firm and every banking and insurance institution. Those men who have no capacity to keep a secret are unfit for positions of trust anywhere. There are thousands of men whose vital need is cultivating a capacity to keep a secret. Men talk too much, and women, too. There is a time to keep silence as well as a time to speak.

Although not belonging to any of the great secret societies about which there has been so much violent discussion, I have only words of praise for those associations which have for their object the maintenance of right against wrong or the reclamation of inebriates or, like the score of mutual benefit societies called by different names, that provide temporary relief for widows and orphans and for men incapacitated by sickness or accident from earning a livelihood. Had it not been for the secret labor organizations in this country monopoly would long ago have, under its ponderous wheels, ground the laboring classes into an intolerable servitude. The men who want the whole earth to themselves would have got it before this had it not been for the banding together of great secret organizations, and while we deplore many things that have been done by them, their existence is a necessity and their legitimate sphere distinctly pointed out by the Providence of God. Such organizations are trying to dismiss from their association all members who are in favor of anarchy and social chaos. They will gradually cease anything like tyranny over their members and will forbid violent interference with any man's work, whether he belongs to their union or is outside of it, and will declare their disgust with any such rule as that passed in England by the Manchester Bricklayers' association, which says any man found running or working beyond a regular speed shall be fined two shillings sixpence for the first offense, five shillings for the second, ten shillings for the third, and if still persisting shall be dealt with as the committee thinks proper.

There are secret societies in our colleges that have letters of the Greek alphabet for their nomenclature, and their members are at the very front in scholarship and irreproachable in morals, while there are others the scene of carousal, and they gamble, and they drink, and they graduate knowing a hundred times more about sin than they do of geometry and Sophocles. In other words, secret societies, like individuals, are good or bad, are the means of moral health or of temporal and eternal damnation. All good people recognize the vice of slandering an individual, but many do not see the sin of slandering an organization. There are old secret societies in this and other countries, some of them centuries old, which have been widely denounced as immoral and damaging in their influence, yet I have hundreds of personal friends who belong to them—friends who are consecrated to God, pillars in the church, faithful in all relations of life, examples of virtue and piety. They are the kind of friends whom I would have for my executors at the time of decease, and they are the men whom I would have carry me out to the last sleep when I am dead. You cannot make me believe that they would belong to bad institutions. They are the men who would stamp on anything iniquitous, and I would certainly rather take their testimony in regard to such societies than the testimony of those who, having been sworn in as members, by their assault upon them confess themselves perjurers.

One of these secret societies gave for the relief of the sick in 1873, in this country, \$1,490,274. Some of these societies have poured a very heaven of sunshine and benediction into the home of suffering. Several of them are founded on fidelity to good citizenship and the Bible. I have never taken one of their degrees. They might give me the grip a thousand times and I would not recognize it. I am ignorant of their passwords, and I must judge entirely from the outside. But Christ has

given us a rule by which we may judge not only all individuals, but all societies, secret and open. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Bad societies make bad men. Good societies make good men. A bad man will not stay in a good society. A good man will not stay in a bad society. Then try all secret societies by two or three rules.

Test the first: Their influence on home, if you have a home. That wife soon loses her influence over her husband who nervously and foolishly looks upon all evening absence as an assault on domesticity. How are the great enterprises of reform and art and literature and beneficence and public weal to be carried on if every man is to have his world bounded on one side by his front doorstep and on the other side by his back window, knowing nothing higher than his own attic or lower than his own cellar? That wife who becomes jealous of her husband's attention to art or literature or religion or charity is breaking her own scepter of conjugal power. I know an instance where a wife thought that her husband was giving too many nights to Christian service, to charitable service, to prayer-meetings and to religious convocation. She systematically decoyed him away until now he attends no church, waits upon no charitable institution and is on a rapid way to destruction, his morals gone, his money gone and, I fear, his soul gone.

Here are six secular nights in the week. "What shall I do with them?" says the father and the husband. "I will give four of these nights to the improvement and entertainment of my family, either at home or in good neighborhood. I will devote one to charitable institutions. I will devote one to my lodge." I congratulate you. Here is a man who says: "Out of the six secular nights of the week I will devote five to lodges and clubs and associations and one to the home, which night I will spend in scowling like a March squall, wishing I was out spending it as I have spent the other five." That man's obituary is written. Not one out of ten thousand that ever get so far on the wrong road ever stops. Gradually his health will fail through late hours, and through too much stimulants he will be first-rate prey for erysipelas and rheumatism of the heart.

The doctor coming in will at a glance see it is not only present disease he must fight, but years of fast living. The clergyman, for the sake of the feelings of the family, on the funeral day will only talk in religious generalities. The men who got his yacht in the eternal rapids will not be at the obsequies. They have pressing engagements that day. They will send flowers to the coffin, will send their wives to utter words of sympathy, but they will have engagements elsewhere. They never come. Bring me mallet and chisel, and I will cut that man's epitaph: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord?" "No," you say, "that would not be appropriate." "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his?" "No," you say, "that would not be appropriate." Then give me the mallet and the chisel, and I will cut an honest epitaph: "Here lies the victim of dissipating associations!"

Another test by which you can find whether your secret society is right or wrong is the effect it has on your secular occupation. I can understand how through such an institution a man can reach commercial success. I know some men have formed their best business relations through such a channel. If the secret society has advantaged you in an honorable calling, it is a good one, but has your credit failed? Are bargain makers now more anxious how they trust you with a bale of goods? Have the men whose names were down in the commercial agency A1 before they entered the society been going down since in commercial standing? Then look out. You and I every day know of commercial establishments going to ruin through the social excesses of one or two members, their fortune beaten to death with ball players' bat or cut amidships with the front prow of the regatta or going down under the swift hoofs of the fast horses or drowned in the large potatoes of cognac or Monongahela. That secret society was the Loch Earn. Their business was the Ville de Havre. They struck, and the Ville de Havre went under!

The third test by which you may know whether the society to which you belong is good or bad is this: What is its effect on your sense of moral and religious obligation? Now, if I should take the names of all the people in this audience and put them on a roll and then I should lay that roll back of this organ and a hundred years from now some one should take that roll and call it from A to Z there would not one of you answer. I say that any society that makes me forget that fact is a bad society.

Oh, man astray, God help you! I am going to make a very stout rope. You know that sometimes a rope-maker will take very small threads and wind them together until after awhile they become a ship cable. And I am going to take some very small, delicate threads and wind

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them together until they make a very stout rope. I will take all the memories of the marriage day—a thread of laughter, a thread of light, a thread of music, a thread of banqueting, a thread of congratulation—and I twist them together, and I have one strand. Then I take a thread of the hour of the first advent in your house, a thread of the darkness that preceded, and a thread of the light that followed, and a thread of the beautiful scarf that little child used to wear when she bounded out at eventide to greet you, and then a thread of the beautiful dress in which you laid her away for the resurrection, and then I twist all these threads together, and I have another strand. Then I take a thread of the scarlet robe of a suffering Christ, and a thread of the white raiment of your loved ones before the throne, and a string of the harp cherubic, and a string of the harp seraphic, and I twist them all together, and I have a third strand. "Oh," you say, "either strand is enough to hold fast a world!" No. I will take these strands, and I will twist them together, and one end of that rope I will fasten, not to the communion table, for it shall be removed; not to a pillar of the organ, for that will crumble in the ages; but I wind it round and round the cross of a sympathizing Christ, and, having fastened one end of the rope to the cross, I throw the other end to you. Lay hold of it! Pull for your life! Pull for Heaven!

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